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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 001831

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DEPARTMENT FOR NEA FRONT OFFICE AND NEA/ELA; NSC FOR
ABRAMS/SINGH/GAVITO/YERGER

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SUBJECT: LEBANON'S PRESIDENCY: MICHEL EDDE'S VICTORY
LINKED TO HIZBALLAH

REF: BEIRUT 1820

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Classified By: Jeffrey Feltman, Ambassador, per 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (S) As of 11/21, Syria's allies continue to push hard for Michel Edde to be Lebanon's next president. Hizballah's Wafiq Safa predicted confidently to UN envoy Geir Pedersen that Saad Hariri, the strongest hold out against Edde, would eventually succumb to the pressure. Suleiman Franjeh told us directly that he backs Edde and expects Michel Aoun will soon announce publicly his support for a back-up candidate, believed to be Edde. Given that Edde would not be expected to serve his entire term (due to age or voluntary retirement), many other presidential candidates favor him above their other rivals. March 14 Maronites, for peculiarly Christian reasons, find Edde easier to accept than other "non-partisan" compromise figures. Arab League Secretary General Amr Moussa told us that, to get a president elected this week, Edde is the only choice.

¶2. (S) Yet, of all the seven names on Patriarch Sfeir's list of potential candidates, Edde's worries us nearly as much as Aoun's: if Edde becomes president via force upon the March 14 Majority Leader, Hizballah and Syria will have created the Edde presidency. Edde, always fearful, will see the bigger threats coming from Hizballah and Syria, and he will lean in their direction. The always opportunistic Lebanese would take notice that a candidate fervently opposed by Saad Hariri was eventually elected, with the expectation that further March 14 concessions would follow in the government formation. March 14, despite its parliamentary majority, thus finds itself in a terrible bind: either accept a candidate whose power base would be based on Hizballah's support, or face a potential vacuum in the presidency that could potentially lead to violence and, eventually, the election of LAF Commander Michel Sleiman, believed to be Syria's top choice. We hope that the international and regional community can identify the right elements of pressure so that Syria's allies, not March 14, have to make the compromises. End summary.

PRO-SYRIANS UNITE AROUND MICHEL EDDE

¶3. (S) Yesterday, we noted (reftel) that three names out of the Patriarch's list of seven proposed presidential candidates remain in play: former Minister Michel Edde, MP Robert Ghanem, and, a distance third, Central Bank Governor Riad Salameh. Consistent with our policy not to "play the name game" in this year's presidential election, we are not publicly commenting on the merits of these three. But we note privately with some alarm that Michel Edde has again pulled ahead as the front-runner, due in large part to the incessant drum-beat of support he is getting from the pro-Syrians. All that is stopping Edde from being elected Lebanon's next president is Saad Hariri's so far steadfast refusal.

¶4. (S) Nevertheless, Nabih Berri's staff continues to promote Edde as the only acceptable candidate from the Patriarch's list. Given his practice of deflecting responsibility to others, Berri (whom we see on Thursday, not our idea of a Thanksgiving treat) will undoubtedly tell us that we can solve the presidency by getting Hariri to concede to Edde. UN Special Envoy for Lebanon Geir Pedersen reported that Hizballah's Wafiq Safa told him today that Hizballah wanted Edde and was convinced he would win, due to two factors: first, Hariri will cave to the pressure, given that Hariri has crossed numerous previously defined red lines. Second, Michel Aoun, attracted by the promise of an abbreviated Edde presidency, will come out formally and publicly in favor of Edde, making him virtually unstoppable. Suleiman Franjieh, the pro-Syrian feudal lord from the north, told us on 11/21 that he, too, favored Edde and thought Aoun would back him. (We wonder if the French, now in bed with the Syrians regarding Lebanon's presidential elections, are leaning toward Edde, to satisfy the Syrians and claim a victory.)

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HARIRI'S CONFESSİONAL AND FAMILİAL GRUDGES

¶5. (S) As late as today, Hariri's circle tells us that Saad remains opposed to Edde. Hariri has both confessional and personal reasons for vetoing Edde's name. At the confessional level, the Sunnis tend not to like Edde, with his public record of criticizing the Sunnis and denouncing the Palestinians (also Sunnis). Intellectually, he is of the Maronite school that tends to see Sunnis, rather than Hizballah, as the threat to Lebanon's Christian identity. Despite his protests (of the "some-of-my-best-friends-are-Sunnis" type), Edde projects a knee-jerk bias against the Sunnis that grates on Hariri. At the personal level, Edde in the late 1990s responded to a request by President Emile Lahoud to assemble a file on Rafiq Hariri's questionable business practices in the telecommunications field. The Hariri family has neither forgotten nor forgiven.

¶6. (S) Hariri's adamant refusal of Edde should be the end of his candidacy under the French initiative. After all, those opposed with equal vehemence by Nabih Berri -- including another octogenarian, Michel Khoury -- have vanished from discussion. But Hariri is feeling the heat from some of the foreign visitors, who wish to claim victory by Friday, and even from some of his March 14 allies. March 14 Christians, for example -- with the notable exception of Nassib Lahoud (who described Edde as an "immoral liar") -- to varying degrees accept Edde over other compromise figures, given that Edde is considered to be a "genuine" Maronite. Walid Jumblatt, increasingly nervous about what he perceives as a lack of tangible international and regional pressure in favor of March 14, is ready to back Edde, too, if that means an avoidance of a vacuum Jumblatt believes will lead to security problems in his Druse area first.

OUR RESERVATIONS ABOUT EDDE

¶ 7. (S) In general, our policy is that any name from the Patriarch's list who garners a genuine consensus and wins the parliamentary majority's approval is acceptable as president.

We do not propose trying to impose a veto over Edde's name, especially as a veto would be ineffective and simply reinforce Hizballah's support for him. But we do have more concerns about Edde than virtually any other name on the Patriarch's list -- with the possible exception of Michel Aoun. Edde is not the only one who has questionable links to Syria, of course, but the intensity of focus upon him increases our suspicions that either his links (conducted via the odious Michel Samaha) are more profound or that Syria has calculated that he is ultimately more pliable than the others. While Edde cultivates a wide circle of international contacts in his role as happy gourmand and benefactor, we sense that he would be particularly susceptible to intimidation. And the heaviest intimidation is going to originate from Damascus and Hizballah, two powers he already views as bulwarks against the Sunni takeover of Lebanon he so fears. In short, Edde as a person is charming, generous to a fault with hospitality and gifts. But Edde as a politician is clearly an acquired taste that doesn't suit the American palate. As president, we predict he'll end up more beholden to Syria and Hizballah than others on the Patriarch's list.

THE PROCESS WEAKENS MARCH 14

¶ 8. (S) We also have reservations about the process by which the pro-Syrians are attempting to force Edde onto Hariri. Hariri has already made repeated concessions, including acceptance of a process by which his majority is effectively erased in favor of consensus. Hariri has agreed to tossing out March 14's top candidates and risked March 14 unity in favor of trying to achieve consensus. If Hariri accepts Edde under duress, opportunistic Lebanese will take notice and draw their own conclusions about Hariri's -- and March 14's -- staying power. If Hariri acquires the reputation of never standing firm, the formation of a March 14-dominated cabinet and development of a March 14-dominated cabinet program becomes that much harder. With the presidency as precedent, the pro-Syrians will demand consensus on every decision. In

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addition, the Edde presidency will have been created by Syria and Hizballah, with Edde and all Lebanese recognizing where the actual power rests.

MARCH 14'S BIND

¶ 9. (S) Thus, March 14 finds itself in a bind, a bit more than 48 hours before the expiration of Emile Lahoud's presidential term: does March 14 surrender to Michel Edde's ascendancy to Baabda Palace, as demanded by Hizballah and other pro-Syrians, or does March 14 stand firm and allow the presidential clock to reach midnight? How March 14 leaders answer that question depends on their calculations of what will happen on the ground in the case of a presidential vacuum and what will be the international and regional reaction. Those who want to avoid violence at all costs because they believe that no help is on the way -- and Jumblatt is now in this fearful camp -- tend to go for Edde (or almost anyone else, for that matter, as Jumblatt's belated support for LAF Commander Michel Sleiman suggests). There is a sense by March 14 activists including the March 14 MPs in the Phoenicia Hotel that the international community has left them standing alone in the middle of the road they were supposed to cross together.

¶ 10. (S) To prevent those elements from March 14 from gaining the ascendancy, we hope that, regionally and internationally, the pressure starts to be applied against March 8 forces and their backers, rather than Hariri and the

parliamentary majority. Given March 8 intransigence, the French initiative has become truly perverse, in that, now, the easiest solution for the presidency is to force a weak character whose commitment to the March 14 core values is questionable at best onto the parliamentary majority.

¶11. (S) Somehow, we need to find ways to restore the weight of the March 14 majority in the presidential decision making process. The simplest procedural way to do so is to get parliament to vote on the names from the Patriarch's list (or some portion of the list). But those blocking parliament answer to outside powers who can't be influenced from here. We are also concerned that, should an Edde presidency (or something similar) become unstoppable, the din of voices claiming -- either in dismay or joy, depending on their position on the political spectrum here -- that the U.S. has "abandoned" March 14 will become deafening.

FELTMAN